UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO
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THE HOUSING OF POTATO DIGGERS

BY

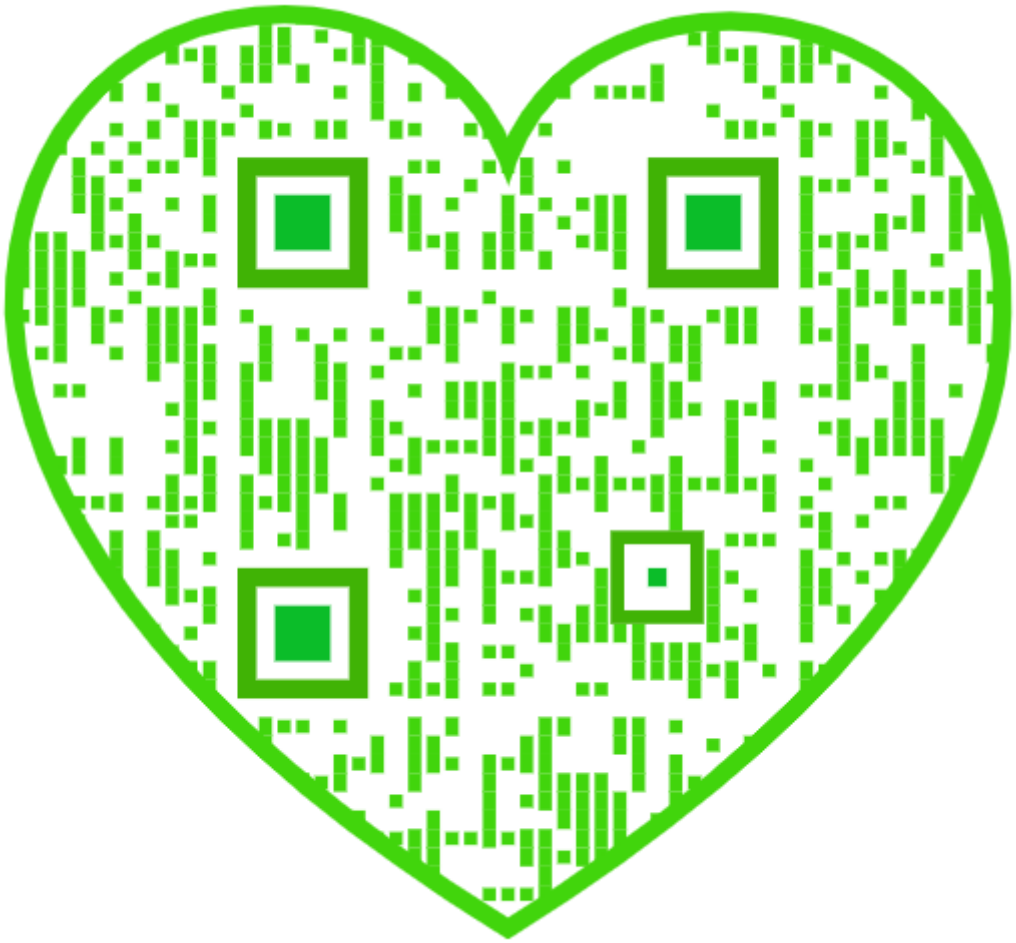
MARGARET H. IRWIN

ISSUED BY

The Scottish Council for Women's Trades

And Union for the Abolition of Sweating.

Price 2d.; By Post 2½d.



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And Union for the Abolition of Sweating.

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The Housing of Potato Diggers.

INTRODUCTION.

The Housing in Rural Districts of workers both permanently and temporarily employed, is a subject which only emerges at lengthy intervals, and in a sectional form, when it happens that some organisation turns the searchlight on one or the other phase of it. Then we have pictures of a particularly lurid character thrown on the screen.

Recently the Miners, who have been renewing their efforts for the abolition of the old and insanitary dwellings which still disgrace certain Mining Districts, held the stage. Again, from time to time, the conscience of the public has been startled by revelations concerning the Bothy system and the Housing of Navvies.

All of these are really sections of the one great problem of Rural Housing (in the defects of which some persons see a contributory cause of the depopulation of the Highlands revealed by the recent census) and it would seem the time has now come when it might well be taken up and dealt with as a whole.

Instead of leaving the Housing of these workers to the chance Bye-Laws and varying standards of Local Authorities, most of whom are open to the criss-cross currents of local influence, what should be aimed at is the embodiment in the Public Health Act of certain definite provisions whereby some general standard of comfort and decency consistent with modern requirements shall be made applicable to the whole country.

It is fully recognised that in the unforeseen emergencies due to exigencies of weather, etc., which may occur in harvesting, a certain amount of latitude must be allowed in cases of temporary housing for short periods. But where the employment of the workers is of

regular recurrence, to an extent which can usually be anticipated with some exactitude, proper provision should be insisted upon.

The neglect of this question may be partly due to the lack of concerted effort among the various sections of workers affected. Still more is it due to the attitude of masterly inactivity which Government Departments promptly assume when Scottish business is introduced to their notice. A large proportion of the sufferers, be it further noted, are voteless women whom Government can safely disregard.

The conditions of workers employed in Potato Gathering in Scotland, and the insanitary conditions of their housing, etc., have for some years past, engaged the attention of the Scottish Council for Women's Trades and Union for the Abolition of Sweating. The Council have made several direct and systematic investigations into the subject, and have brought the deplorable conditions which obtain in many cases before the Scottish Office, and before Parliament. Over a year ago a deputation from the Council waited on the Secretary for Scotland and urged on him the need for a Government inquiry into the whole matter. The subject was also laid by them before a special conference of Scottish Members of Parliament, and the latter were so much impressed by the serious nature of the facts submitted to them, that the Liberal Members organised a deputation of themselves to wait on Lord Pentland, and again press on him the need for a Government inquiry. A series of questions on the subject was also put in the House. Notwithstanding all these efforts, however, the Authorities have, up to the present, refused to grant the desired investigation.

In consequence of this, the Scottish Council for Women's Trades and Union for the Abolition of Sweating undertook themselves to make a further inquiry. I have now to present the following report summarising the results of this, which, with previous investigations, has covered a total of 60 farms.

REPORT.

The accommodation in the farms visited may be classified under four headings :—

A. "**Bad,**" under which come 19 farms.
B. "**Indifferent,**" including 15 farms.
C. "**Good,**" do. 15 farms.
D. "**Excellent,**" do. 7 farms.

The "Bad" and "Indifferent" cases make a total of 34, thus somewhat exceeding the "Good" and "Excellent," which number 22. In 3 cases I found on visiting that potato diggers were no longer employed.

In one of these the conditions had been specially bad, and in one case I was refused permission to see the workers' accommodation.

To take the "**A**" **class or** "**Bad**" first, which included 19 farms The main features of the accommodation here were earthen floors, old, dirty, and ill-ventilated buildings, usually windowless, and frequently dilapidated to such an extent as to be neither wind nor water tight.

Farms Nos. 5, 7, 8 and 31, may be taken as typical examples of the accommodation in this class.

At **Farm No. 5** there were 5 or 6 men and 25 women employed. The accommodation allotted to the workers was a shed, with a granary above. Both places were dark, dirty and ill-ventilated. The shed had an earthen floor, and the granary above was low in the roof and very badly lighted. One of the farm hands, who acted as guide, said the workers suffered great hardships from having no place to cook their food, or dry their clothes when they got wet, as they often did. The only fire, an open one, was made in a corner of the farm-yard, and some way off from the sleeping sheds. He said he 'tried always to keep up a bit fire for them—not that it was his duty, or any other body's to do this, but that he was so sorry for the poor things.' The workers were expected to bring their own cooking utensils and blankets, 'and sometimes they went short enough.' In most cases the blankets had to be eked out with old

potato sacks. The men and women arranged their accommodation in the shed and granary 'just as they pleased; nobody minded them.' "Indeed, Ma'am," said the guide, "it's a sad, rough life for the women, and they seem nice, quiet women too." There was less excuse for negligence at this farm, as the workers remained here for three weeks.

This place made a specially dreary impression. The night was closing in and a heavy rain was coming on and fast extinguishing the poor flickering fire in the barn-yard, and one had a cheerless picture of weary toilers coming back wet, hungry and tired, after their heavy day's work in the fields, to this miserable shelter, where nothing either in the way of warmth or comfort awaited them.

At **Farm No. 8** from 25 to 30 men and women were employed. One of the men agreed to show the workers' accommodation. He said 'he was ashamed to do so. The place was scarcely fit for beasts, let alone human beings; but they don't mind for the likes of us.'

He led the way through a narrow lane, ankle-deep with mud, at the back of the farm-steading, and threw open a broken door, which ushered into a dark, dirty and dilapidated shed. The only light came through a hole in the wall, where there had once been a window, but which was now destitute of even the framework of that, and through which the rain and wind were at the time driving heavily. The workers hung up sacks at night to keep out the cold and wet, the guide said.

On the earthen floor, damp and dirty, were piled heaps of straw for bedding. Two blankets were supplied to each worker by the merchant; but, as these were quite insufficient to keep them warm in such a place, the workers had added old sacks and other coverings. The bedding had a filthy appearance. The men and women were all lodged together in this shed. The only fire provided was one under a sort of archway in the farmyard, and was practically in the open. Two workers, who were trying to cook something on it, were standing exposed to the heavy rain and wind.

At Farm No. 7, the "gaffer" of the gang complained strongly of the accommodation. "They are not given even a box," he said, "to "take their food on, and the whole place is swarming with rats." The men and women were all lodged together, and there were no locks on the door. The only provision for light and air were unglazed apertures in the wall, where there had once been windows. There

were no closets, and the fire was in the open. "The farmers is just "favouring themselves when they say the workers want to lodge "together. I would walk two miles to get a place to myself," he said

On the same farm I saw another shed in which the same conditions prevailed. 7 men and 10 girls were lodged together here, and, I was informed, 'there were more coming to-night.'

"We would like separate sheds, but we can't get them," said one of the women. "We are packed together like herrings in a barrel." Some of the squads will stay a month here. "When it is wet and "windy," said another, "we just have to suffer. We have no place "to cook, and our clothes have just to dry on us."

There is no doubt that, in bad weather, these workers must suffer considerable hardship.

The evidence here was somewhat conflicting. The farmer, whom I saw later, and who appeared slightly to resent my visit, said—"The "merchants are entirely responsible for the accommodation. We give "the workers what accommodation we have, in order to save them "walking. At one farm I know of the workers have pulled down "the partition put up. Different squads will not mix with each "other. When a new squad came last night they were offered that "empty shed up there for the separate use of the women, and they "would not take it. They are all very shy and not amenable to "outside control."

Farm No. 31.—Fifty workers are employed here for six weeks. About 15 men and lads are lodged in an old disused stable, with an earthen floor. Some 35 women sleep in an old granary. The walls of both buildings were of rough-hewn stone, grimy with age and dirt. There were no windows in either of the buildings, light and air being admitted through long, open slits in the walls. These being unglazed, the workers must have suffered severely from cold and wet in bad weather. Straw was provided for bedding, but neither tables, seats, nor any furniture even of the most rudimentary kind.

The workers made their fires in the open.

The farmer said, "The workers never complain. If furniture "were provided for them they would not use it. But I make it a "rule that the men and the women keep separate."

In class "B" or "Indifferent," containing 15 farms, the buildings were weather-proof, and in some cases fairly clean, but they were destitute of furniture, or any appliances for comfort, and nothing

was provided for the workers beyond the bare shelter of four walls and a roof.

Class "C" or "Good" contains 15 farms. The accommodation here might include, in addition to good, clean, well-lighted sheds for sleeping, separate places for cooking and eating meals, with special fire-places under cover, and a reasonable amount of furniture in the way of tables and benches. The following is a typical example :—

At **Farm No. 1** twenty-four women were employed. They were lodged in a bothy which was both windtight and water tight, and sufficiently lighted and ventilated. It also contained a good fireplace.

The bedding consisted of a plentiful supply of clean straw, spread on a wooden platform raised over two feet from the ground. Blankets were supplied to the workers by the potato merchants. Adjoining the bothy was a kitchen where the food was cooked, and a woman assisted in its preparation. Also a big fire was made outside on which potatoes were boiled. The woman in charge said the workers were "nice, civil, well-behaved girls, and very cheery too; they have a dance in the barn nearly every night." Their breakfast, taken at 5 a.m. was usually tea and eggs ; dinner taken at 11.30 a.m., ham, onions and tea; and the evening meal, taken at 6.30 p.m., tea, potatoes and salt fish.

The men workers were lodged at the farm by themselves. The accommodation was similar to that provided for the women. The workers in question were employed by the Leith Co-operative Society, and it was stated that the Society not only provided better accommodation than the average, but that they paid 3s. a week more than other merchants in wages.

Here, as in other places, the workers were employed in pairs—i.e., a "howker" or "digger" and a "gatherer." They made on an average £1 10s. per week per pair, rising in the case of Co-operative employes to £1 13s. with a minimum of £1 8s.

In class "D" or "Excellent," 7 farms deserve to be ranked. Farms Nos. 11 and 35 are typical examples of this class, and are worth quoting as showing what may be done.

Farm No. 11.—Between 80 and 100 workers are accommodated here for about a month. They are employés of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society, and have come to this farm regularly for 10 years. The remark was made to me, "We can always trust the workers the Co-operators send us."

In one large shed with strong roof, good windows, and

cemented floor, 23 women were lodged. In another, with the same provisions, 16. In a granary, clean, well-ventilated and comfortable, 8 were lodged.

Separate and most excellent sheds were provided for the men. The sheds for both sexes had pulleys over-head for drying wet clothes. Two very good sheds, with well-fitted fire places, were provided specially for cooking. Hot plates had been put in these, but as the workers disliked using them they had been removed.

The farmer said he took no married people. He had no difficulty whatever in arranging that the sexes should have separate quarters for sleeping.

I was very favourably impressed by the appearance of the workers here. The girls were, almost without exception, clean and nicely dressed, many of them wearing white blouses and fresh cotton frocks. They seemed to be of a superior class, and very pleasant relations apparently existed between them and the farmer. In going through the place I met with numerous expressions of appreciation and gratitude on the part of the workers regarding the arrangements made for them.

Farm No. 35.—This with No. 11 presented the high water mark of comfort and excellence of arrangements met with in the course of my inquiry. 40 workers are employed here from 4 to 6 weeks. Two excellent large sheds, with cemented floors, white-washed walls, and windows opening out, were provided specially for the workers' accommodation. These were well-ventilated and lighted, and had pulleys overhead for drying the workers' clothes.

A special shed with large fireplace, and hot plate for cooking, was also provided.

The farmer said the same workers came to him year after year He was very sympathetic on the subject of the Council's inquiry and said he was glad to hear the matter was being taken up. It was time something was done. He had no difficulty in keeping the Irish workers separate; they knew it was the rule of the place, and the arrangement was never questioned; but the Scotch tramps were more difficult to manage.

His man had instructions to change the straw for the beds regularly and frequently. He thought straw was the most sanitary form of bedding in the circumstances. He was very thankful he had not put up wooden bunks. One of the new sheds had cost £150.

He took a great interest in his workers. They were apparently

of a superior class. Here also several of the workers expressed to me great appreciation of the arrangements made for their comfort.

REPORTED CASES OF OVERCROWDING, &c.

Witness A reported that he had found 70 men and women lodged together in a hayloft. There was no provision made for decency or comfort. The workers who came from Ireland were, on the whole, very decent, well-behaved people, but large numbers of a disorderly class also came to the district during the potato harvest. Although he had no direct information regarding the conditions last season, he had no reason to believe that any change had been made. A case of meningitis had occurred among the workers. This terminated fatally, the man having died after being removed to the hospital.

This statement was corroborated by witnesses B, C, and D.

Witness E said he had known 6 men and 12 women to be lodged in a place 12 feet square, while 40 altogether were lodged in a byre. In another farm he knew of 200 men and women being all lodged together indiscriminately for a month.

Witness F said that he had been reading with much interest the report of the Council's deputation to Lord Pentland, and was glad to see that some influential body was taking up the matter of the housing of these workers. He thought it urgently called for attention. He had made a personal investigation officially two years ago among the surrounding farms. There was no doubt that workers suffered great hardships. He had visited at night and found men, women and children all lodged together in the same buildings. A great hardship for the women was the want of any place to wash, and also the want of other sanitary provisions. The cooking was mostly done in the open. He spoke highly of the Irish workers, who, he said, were generally very well-behaved. The difficulty was with the specially low class of workers who came from the slums of Glasgow, Greenock, Paisley, and other neighbouring towns.

The women employed in this industry were exposed to greater risks in the way of assault than in any other with which he was acquainted. He thought one reason why the women did not make use of separate sleeping quarters was the absence of securely fastened doors. The fires were generally in the open, and this was also a great hardship. The Authorities were in possession of ample evidence, but they had taken no action on the reports sent to them.

Public attention had been drawn to the matter in the press by the local Roman Catholic Clergymen. The local farmers had replied pointing out the difficulties of dealing with workers of this class, stating further, that the wages they made were sufficient to allow them to lodge in the town, but that accommodation had been given them at the farms without any charge, and as a convenience to the workers themselves.

Witness said the farmers in the district were really anxious to do their best for the workers, but the whole matter was one of great difficulty. Conditions in some other districts were very much worse than here.

SUMMARY.

It may be noted that one feature is shared by the large majority of the farms visited, namely, that the sleeping accommodation is common to both sexes. As already shown the evidence given by farmers and workers on this point was very conflicting. The former insist emphatically that the workers prefer this arrangement, while the latter just as emphatically contradict the statement.

In some cases the circumstances certainly seemed to bear out the farmers' contention that it was the workers' deliberate choice to lodge together; but the explanation of this may be found in the fact that the workers usually come in family parties, that the women workers are timid and shy, and that they feel safer in the company of their own men-folk than among strangers, especially when the lodging offered is a shed, the doors of which cannot be fastened.

With reference to the women workers' reluctance in some cases to take the separate accommodation offered, it must be remembered further that during the potato harvest the country districts are infested by tramps, and several of the women complained to me that they were often subjected to annoyance from them. This statement was borne out by evidence from an official source.

Notwithstanding their primitive habits emphatic and unanimous testimony was given on every side as to the good conduct of the Irish workers.

Many of these women have left their homes in some remote country district in Ireland for the first time. It is a plunge into the unknown for them, and they are almost incredibly shy and distrustful of strangers. "What part of Ireland do you come from?" I asked one girl. She hung her head for a time, and then informed me, 'Sure she was after disremembering.' "Perhaps if you consider a

little the name may come back to you," I suggested. After a further lengthy pause, and a whispered consultation with a friend she at last confided in me that "perhaps it might be called Arranmore."

SUGGESTIONS AS TO IMPROVEMENTS.

The Scottish Council for Women's Trades and Union for the Abolition of Sweating feel that there is enough evidence to show the urgent need for reform in the Housing of these Workers. In submitting suggestions for such, it is fully recognised that in many cases their stay is very brief, but it must also be remembered they come every year. Again, while it is true that the work is specially dirty and rough, and that it must be carried on in all weathers, thereby rendering it difficult, if not impossible, for the workers to keep anything beyond the most simple form of domestic appointments reasonably clean, and also that the potato gatherers themselves are, for the most part, persons of very primitive habits and needs, still, a minimum standard of comfort and decency should certainly be enforced over all. This should include buildings which are weather-proof, adequately lighted, and provided with some simple articles of furniture—such as tables and seats; a sufficient supply of clean straw for bedding, also blankets when the workers do not bring their own; a fire, under cover, for cooking food and drying clothes; and some simple sanitary accommodation. Separate sleeping-sheds, with securely-fastened doors, ought, of course, to be provided in all cases for the women workers.

With regard to bedding, it seems advisable, for sanitary reasons, that this should always consist of material which can be renewed every season. Probably the most sanitary, as well as the most comfortable bedding, is straw or hay, when clean and supplied in sufficient quantities. The workers themselves express a preference for this.

Among suggestions made by farmers, workers, and others, in the course of my inquiry, I may quote the following:—

That a superintendent should be appointed to supervise the housing arrangements for the workers, to see to their comforts in regard to having fires ready for their return at night, and to be responsible for decency, cleanliness, order, and general good conduct.

That in cases where there are a number of farms adjacent a suitable common lodging house might be put up.

That caravans might be provided by the potato merchants to go

from place to place. (This is done already in one case, but is obviously only suitable where the gangs are small).

That tents might be used for accommodating the men workers.

That the cost of erecting suitable buildings should be borne by the proprietor, and not by the tenant farmers.

WHAT SOME LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARE DOING.

I should like, in particular, to direct attention to the excellent practical recommendations issued by the Perth County Council, and in the Counties of Stirling and Dunbarton.

In the County of Perth the following recommendations have been issued to farmers who sell potatoes to merchants who bring diggers to the farms to lift the potatoes.

(1) Sufficient dry and airy accommodation should be provided, separate for each sex of the diggers, to sleep in. Previous to the arrival of the diggers the walls and roofs of these houses should be swept down to remove cobwebs and dust, and the whole interior receive a coat of lime-wash.

(2) A room should be provided for the diggers taking their meals in, and rough tables and seats should be provided for this room.

(3) A fire, under cover, should be provided for cooking food and drying wet clothing.

(4) Abundance of clean dry straw should be provided for making up the diggers' beds.

(5) A shed should be provided for the diggers' washing, and sufficient privy accommodation must be provided.

Visits of inspection will be made during the potato-lifting season to ascertain if the above recommendations have been given effect to.

The following recommendations have also been issued to merchants who purchase potatoes at farms in the district and send diggers to lift them during the season.

(1) To make sure that the ganger sees to the separation of the sexes in the accommodation provided for sleeping.

(2) Sufficient blankets should be supplied to make the diggers comfortable.

(3) A women should be told off to see to the cleanliness of the

accommodation provided, and the personal cleanliness of the diggers.

In the Counties of Stirling and Dumbarton, the Medical Officer of Health, Dr John C. M'Vail has made an extensive inquiry into the Housing of Potato Diggers. In the course of this much valuable information has been collected. The detailed results are given in the Twentieth Annual Report (year 1910) to the County Council and District Committees. Dr M'Vail has also issued the following letter to farmers—

"County Councils of Stirling and Dunbarton.

"Health Department,
"24 George Square,
"Glasgow, July, 1910.

"Dear Sir,

"*Housing of Potato Diggers.*

"As the time is now approaching for the digging of this year's crop of potatoes, I have to bring under your notice the principal points requiring your attention in providing accommodation for any gangs which may visit your farm.

"(1) There should be no overcrowding. At least 400 cubic feet of air space should be provided for each individual. Assuming the available height of an apartment to be 10 feet, this means that the total floor area per diggers should not be less than 40 square feet.

"(2) On no account should male and female diggers sleep in the same apartment.

"(3) Clean bedding should be provided. A sufficiency of clean straw meets this requirement if the diggers bring their own bed clothing—rugs or blankets.

"(4) The apartment should be clean and dry, and sufficiently lit and well ventilated. Bothies, granaries, and barns can usually be adapted for the purpose. Byres are hardly ever satisfactory. Whatever apartments are to be used, the walls, if suitable, should be limewashed beforehand.

"(5) Proper arrangements must be made for cooking, eating, personal ablution, and the drying of wet clothes. Fires built in the open air are quite insufficient. There should always be a roof for shelter, and it may sometimes be necessary to have one fire for cooking and another fire for the drying of wet clothes in bad weather; otherwise the cooking fire ought to be such as can readily be used for

drying clothes if required. Personal ablution may be done in the boiler house or wherever there is a water tap; but it should be under cover, especially in the case of female diggers.

"(6) Definite arrangements should be made for privy accommodation. It is very disgusting to have the ground all round a farm steading dotted all over with human filth, and diggers should be warned accordingly, so that they shall use whatever conveniences are provided. If the privy at the farm is insufficient, some additional temporary provision should be made, but need not be of an elaborate character. Where the same gang travels from place to place, the employer of the diggers should provide a portable pail privy.

"(7) *Water supply.*—This will naturally be that of the farm steading itself. If gravitation water is not led into the farm, care should be taken that any local supply is not polluted through the want of privy accomodation as above referred to.

"I trust that you will give due heed to all these matters, so that no cause of complaint will arise in connection with your premises. The arrangements made need not be elaborate, but they must be sufficient for health and cleanliness and decency.

"I am,

"Yours faithfully,

"JOHN C. M'VAIL."

Along with the above letter a request was sent to the farmers to intimate by reply postcard whether and when diggers were expected.

One of the most satisfactory features met with in my own inquiry was the improvements in accommodation, both in progress and projected for the coming season. In various cases where, up to the present, conditions had been specially bad, excellent new buildings were in the course of erection. In others, concrete floors were being laid down where there had only been earth before; glazed windows were replacing what had formerly been mere open holes in the walls, and other improvements were being made. The "gaffer" of one gang said—"Until this year they never bothered where they put the workers. "They put them anywhere—into the pigstyes sometimes—but they "have made a quare lot of improvements this year, and we had the "Sanitary Inspector seeing us yesterday."

Another "gaffer" repeated the statement that "there had been a "quare lot of improvements this year. He had heard that people "had been enquiring about the workers, and that there had been

"letters in the papers. He wished that other parts of the country "could be shown up in the same way. He had heard that in Ayr- "shire the Members of Parliament had been taking it up, and "speaking up for the Potato Diggers in the House of Commons. It "was time somebody looked after the workers."

I think we may fairly claim to include among the causes which have brought about these improvements, the efforts made by the Scottish Council for Women's Trades in investigating the housing conditions, and bringing these under the notice of authorities, and also the valuable support which has been given us by Scottish Members of Parliament, who have asked questions in the House, and have made special representations to the Secretary for Scotland on the subject. That much still remains to be done, however, will be seen by the evidence contained in the report.

In conclusion, I should like to record my thanks for the courtesy and kindness shown me on my visits to the various farms. The degree of cordiality met with was such as, in the circumstances, I had not ventured to expect. In only two cases was there any reluctance shown to grant me admittance, and in only one was permission actually refused. In all the others I met with the greatest readiness to give me access to the buildings, and to discuss both sides of the question frankly.

MARGARET HARDINGE IRWIN.